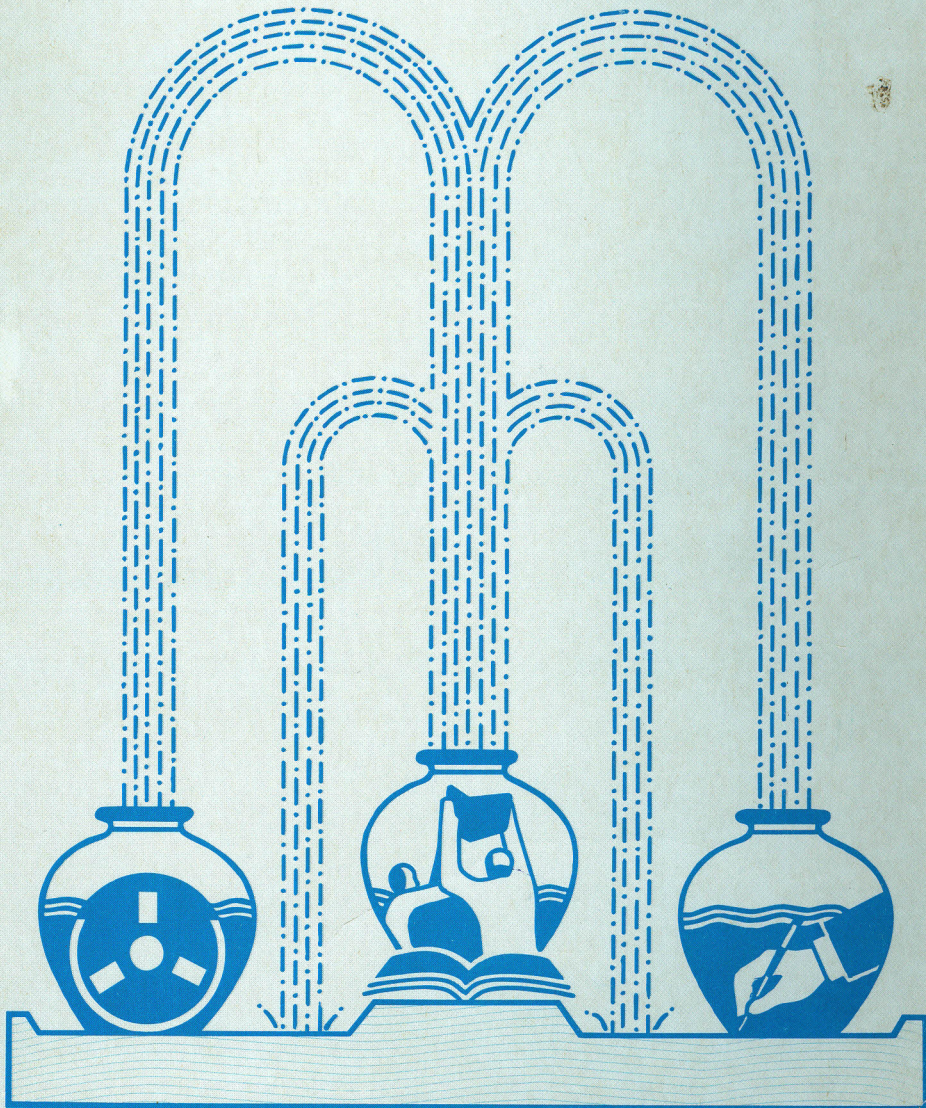


CHEMICHEMI

International Journal of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences

Volume 2, No 1 2002

ISSN 1563 – 1028



Kenyatta University

BOOK REVIEW

Ali A. Mazrui and Alamin M. Mazrui

The Power of Babel: Language and Governance in the African Experience

Kampala: Fountain Publishers; Oxford: James Currey; Nairobi: E.A.E.P.;

Chicago; University of Chicago Press; and Cape Town: David Philip.

1998, 228pp

ISBN

G. Kitula King'ei

Introduction

Ali Mazrui and Alamin Mazrui are both frequent commentators on the African political situation. The elder Mazrui, Ali, is the Director of the Institute of Global Cultural Studies at the State University of New York at Binghamton. Professor Ali Mazrui who holds professorships at many universities in the United States and Africa has taught at Makerere - Uganda, Nigeria, Britain and America. Best remembered as the author and presenter of the much acclaimed BBC Television series, "The Africans: A Triple Heritage", Ali Mazrui has published widely on Africa and global issues. He is one of contemporary Africa's and the world's most respected political economists.

Professor Alamin M. Mazrui is a professor of Black Studies at Ohio State University at Columbus. A well-known linguist and author, he has written extensively on Kiswahili language and literature. His best known original creative works include *Kilio cha Haki*, *Chembe cha Moyo*, *Uchambuzi wa Fasihi ya Kiswahili* (co-authored) and *The Swahili: Idiom and Identity of an African People* (co-authored).

The Text

The debate on the language question in Africa has been on for decades now. Normally, this discussion is characterised by concerns to do with such aspects as the ideal national, regional and continental language policies, the rivalry between the national and official languages, the choice of the language medium of the African creative writer and other similar issues. The need for the modernization of the African lingua franca including Swahili, Hausa or Amharic has also featured prominently in recent times. However, perhaps, the study under review by well-known African scholars is the first to establish a direct link between the language question and the issue of governance in the African situation.

Issued simultaneously in five different countries in Africa, U.S.A and Britain and divided into three major parts, the book, *Power of Babel* contains thirteen chapters. The chapters attempt to relate language to such societal facets and contemporary concerns as history, race, nationalism, identity, colonialism and liberation, religion, cultural pluralism and individualism, democracy, gender and law. The concluding chapter looks at the role of language in a post-modern world order. In the African context, this perspective dissects the realities, opportunities and challenges of the post-cold war, post-apartheid and post-structural adjustment programmes.

The book under review, like its sequel, *Swahili State and Society*, is co-authored by two leading African scholars from a historically famous Mazrui dynasty of Kenya's coast. The two related United States-based Africanists have lately taken a keen interest in the political economy of Kiswahili and other major African languages vis-à-vis their European and other foreign counterparts. As they point out in the introduction, "The linguistic balance sheet on the interplay between the indigenous and

western legacies in Africa so far has been decidedly in favour of European languages that came to the continent as part of the colonial cultural package". However, the writers blame this unfortunate state of affairs on African leadership which, they claim, has failed both to expand Africa's territorial borders and influence as well as to assert the linguistic nationalism of the continent.

While the above argument may sound academically plausible, it is not clear whether the authors subscribe to the philosophy of imperial expansionism cemented at the Berlin 1884 conference which led to the balkanization and colonisation of Africa. Secondly, one is unsure whether the authors are proposing the linguistic nationalism whereby a unitary nation-state such as South Africa or Somalia champions one national language in a multi-racial or uniraical country or indeed, as the fathers of Pan- Africanism such as Kwame Nkrumah advocated, the projection of a continental language symbolising the cultural and political union of Africa. One hopes that it is the latter since it is the only model that presupposes a negotiated political arrangement while the former arrangement has in the recent years served to puncture the myth that the adoption of a single national language strengthens nationalism and national unity. The Somalis as well as the Tutsi and Hutu in Rwanda and Burundi who basically share a single language, culture and religion have failed to cement their nationalism as a single political entity.

However, the obvious point being made by the two authors is that Africa needs to define and fashion its own form of nationalism. As far as the globalization movement and practices are concerned, Africa must continue to strive not to be seen merely as recipients of other people's cultural and linguistic heritage. Africans can achieve, or at least, start marching toward this goal by forging a composite Africa-wide based cultural identity that incorporates authentic African linguistic, material and ideological elements.

Unlike Ngugi wa Thiong'o who traces most of the language problems in post-colonial Africa to the wholesale embarrassment of the neo-colonial culture of the West by the new ruling African élite, the Mazruis seem to accept colonial languages in Africa as an historical 'fait accompli' that is not completely devoid of socio-political and even economic benefits. In most of his critical works, including – *Homecoming, Writers in Politics, Decolonising the Mind* and *Moving the Centre*, Wa Thiong'o consistently argues that the encroachment and dominance of European languages in contemporary Africa is a deliberate imperial programme to conquer, control and direct African world view and identity. Thus, these foreign languages are regarded as colonial tools of socio-economic and political manipulation.

The authors point out that so long as the education systems in Sub-Saharan Africa continue to predicate African languages on the supremacy of European languages, the continents cultural dependency will persist. However, they fail to explicitly state how Africa may overcome this problem. Their conclusion that language must play an important role in the arena of socio-cultural and economic struggle "between the forces of dependency and the tides of authenticity" similarly falls short of making a bold suggestion as to how Africa should strive toward this objective. The ideal of attempting to Anglicize African languages or to Africanize English is a futile and unrealistic approach to domesticating languages since a language entails more than a mere idiom or construction.

Conclusion

The Power of Babel, which is available in paper back, will provide an informative, novel and creative discussion on Africa's and the world's linguistic and cultural complexities and how these have interacted with the realm of politics and economics in the twentieth century.

About the Author

Prof. G. Kitula King'ei is an associate professor and chairman of the Department of Kiswahili and African Languages, Kenyatta University, P.O. Box 43844, Nairobi, Kenya.